

No. 5

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The Young Rough Riders — Weekly —

Most Fascinating Western Stories



**TED
STRONG'S
RIDE
FOR LIFE**

OR
Caught
in the
Circle

By
NED TAYLOR





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Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1904, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y. Application made at the New York Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.

No. 5.

NEW YORK, May 21, 1904.

Price Five Cents.

TED STRONG'S RIDE FOR LIFE;

*New and Second Hand Novels
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SEND ME YOUR LIST. **Dover, Delaware.**

Caught in the Circle.

By **NED TAYLOR.**

CHAPTER I.

BRANDING CATTLE.

"Catch hold mit der rope. Py Chimineddy, der skin oof my hands iss burned off. Hellup! hellup!"

It was branding time at the Black Mountain Ranch, and Carl Schwartz had managed to get his lariat around the horns of a big steer. Carl was on foot and had only managed to rope the steer because the animal was at a standstill when he made his throw. He had expected to throw the steer to the ground, but he had never made a bigger mistake in his life. The steer had not been moving, so there was no check when the rope was drawn tight, to pull him from his feet. The longhorn felt that something was pulling its head back, and it had taken matters into its own hands, or rather hoofs. It started to walk away at a brisk pace, swinging its head from side to side in an effort to shake

off the noose of the lariat. Carl was holding to the other end of the rope, and, although he was stout and heavy, the steer was heavier still. In addition to this advantage, the steer had four legs, whereas Carl had only two, and Carl found himself completely at the mercy of the animal.

It never entered his brain that it might be a wise thing to let go his hold on the rope, so he clung to it like grim death, screaming madly for help.

Bud Morgan and Three-Finger Ike were on their horses a short distance off. The spectacle of a stout German youth trying to hold a steer by the horns struck them as being funny, and they were too busy laughing to move to his assistance very quickly.

In the meantime, the steer was getting angry at having its progress impeded. It shook its head wildly from side to side, and Carl yawed about in big circles

at the other end of the rope. Then the animal broke into a lumbering run. Carl was forced to run, too. His run was fully as lumbering as that of the steer, but it was not at all quick. In a moment he was dragged from his feet. Then he was ploughing along, gouging up the soft earth with his shoulder, and getting his eyes and nose full of sand. He still clung to the rope for all he was worth, but it was finally dragged from his hand, and he was left rolling over and over on the ground while the steed dashed away with the rope still hanging from its horns.

By the time Bud Morgan and Three-Finger Ike had reached his side he was on his feet trying to scrape the dirt from his face.

"Py chimineddy," he mumbled, with his mouth still full of clay, "you fellers iss der slowest what I haf ever seen yet. You sit mit your horses unt laugh when I am in der greatest dangerousness. I felt like a big bob sleigh mit der horses dragging it through a big drift oof snow."

"What cheer, my bully boys?" said Josiah Durkin, prancing up with a big branding iron in his hand.

Josiah was helping to brand the circle-dot cows and was in the full glory of a gorgeously bespangled Mexican sombrero. He glared out from under the broad brim with the manner of a hero of melodrama and brandished the iron about as though it were a sword.

"What ho! my merry men," he said. "Show me the caitiff cow, and right soon will I brand him with me trusty blade."

As the "trusty blade" was nearly white hot at the business end, and as Josiah brandished it about with the reckless abandon of a blood-thirsty pirate, it was rather dangerous for anyone to linger long in his immediate vicinity.

Josiah struck an attitude and extended the branding iron in the air, singeing Carl's hair as he did so. Carl, startled, jumped back and nearly fell down again.

"Holy smokes!" he yelled, "you iss a chump. Are you trying to make a foolishness mit me. Throw down der poker mit der ground unt I will make you

look as if you was tramplin' on mit der herd of elephants."

Josiah declined to accept this kind invitation. Instead, he threw himself into another picturesque attitude of defiance and stood on guard as if his branding iron were a foil.

It looked for a moment as if there was going to be a fight between the two boys, but the appearance of Ted Strong on the scene put a stop to that. He appeared with a big yearling in tow, and with the help of Kid McCann, threw it to the ground and tied its feet.

"Come along, Josh, and do your dooty!" yelled the Kid, and Josiah darted away to brand the cow. Carl continued dusting himself, muttering angrily the while under his breath. He was generally a good-natured boy, but he was in a bad temper at present.

Several of the girls had come up from Crook City to look at the steer branding from a safe distance. Among them was Jane Cummings, the stout girl, who had taken Carl's fancy at a dance a short time before. Carl had expected to win the applause and admiration of Jane by his steer roping.

Instead of that, he had been dragged ignominiously in the dust and made an object of ridicule, and he retired muttering German expletives under his breath. Jane, however, did not see anything funny in the fact that Carl had been dragged by the steer. She ran up to him and helped him to dust his clothes, sympathizing with him, so that Carl was soon mollified and began to think that it was rather an honor than otherwise to be dragged at the heels of a Texas steer. It was an honor, however, that he did not aspire to experience a second time, and he retired from the more active part of the field, and for the rest of the afternoon did duty at the big bonfire at which the circle-dot branding irons were kept heated.

In the meantime, the work of branding the cows went on at a furious rate. Ted Strong was a hustler, and permitted no lagging on the part of his men. When any work was to be done, he went at it with his heart and soul and kept at it until it was finished. He seemed to inspire the same spirit in those around him.

Ted himself, Ben Tremont, Kit Summers, Three-Finger, Kid McCann, Fox Quirk, Jack Slate and Bud Morgan were riding about in the thick of the herd.

They were prodding the cows right and left, looking closely at the left or near flank of the cow where the brand is carried. Whenever a cow was found on which the brand was indistinct, or in which there was no brand at all, he was driven out of the herd and sent up to the space near the fire. There Carl Schwartz and Josiah Durkin, with assistance from one of the cowboys, threw him and roped him, and the sizzling branding iron was pressed against his flank.

Then the steer was cut loose again and allowed to trot back to the herd, none the worse from his painful experience.

The girls were gathered a little way back from the fire in a place of safety, watching the work as it went forward. They all screamed when the brand was pressed against the sides of the cattle, but Three-Finger Ike assured them that they were wasting their sympathy, and that the branding operation hurt the cows very little.

Louise Rossiter, however, refused to believe this, and, after watching the work for a little while, retired to the ranch house and sat on the porch with Mrs. Dunton, who had lived too long in the West and seen too many cows branded to be very much interested in the operation.

As she gazed out of the window, she saw Ted Strong spur out of the herd of cattle and drop from his saddle. A moment later he was by the side of Kate Lamont, and the two were talking earnestly. They moved away from the other girls and soon were a considerable distance off, quite by themselves and apparently forgetful of everything around them.

Although Louise would not have admitted it to her dearest friend, a feeling of pain shot through her as she saw how interested Ted was in Kate Lamont. She had noticed lately that they had been a good deal together, and, when she turned her eyes away from them, they were blurred with tears.

There was some one else watching the conversation between Kate and Ted, but there were no tears in his

eyes. Instead, there was a sullen fire that boded no good for Ted Strong.

The other watcher was Kit Summers, and he had been nursing his anger and jealousy for a long time. He had been Ted's warmest friend, but of late it had seemed to him that Ted had purposely come between him and Kate Lamont. He had said nothing but brooded in silence, his jealousy growing stronger and stronger all the while. He had a violent, passionate nature, and, struggle as he might, his temper often got the better of him. At present he was like a slumbering volcano, liable to burst out in fire and destruction at any moment.

He darted in and out among the cattle with an absolute recklessness that endangered his life a score of times. He went on with his work at a furious pace, but his eyes were always gazing in the direction of Ted and Kate, who had strolled further and further off by themselves.

"Hello thar, boss!" yelled Bud Morgan, "I guess we've about cleaned up all the unbranded mavericks."

Ted sprang away from Kate and darted back to the herd.

"All branded now, eh?" he asked, pleasantly.

"You would know that yourself if you had been attending to business," said Kit, in such a fierce and surly tone that Ted glanced at him in astonishment. Kit was glaring at his young captain, and his face was pale with anger. The bleeding sides of his pony showed that he had used his spurs savagely.

"Ye've got as well branded a herd as thar is this side of the Rio," said Three-Finger Ike. "Will Bud an' me hike 'em back down the valley ter graze a bit?"

"Go ahead," said Ted. "Get back soon, too, for it's about supper time. Come on, Kit. Let's go up to the house and wash up."

"I'm not going up to the house now," said Kit. "I'm going down with Bud and Ike."

Before Ted could answer him he had sunk his spurs into his horse, wheeled suddenly, and darted away across the prairie with the speed of a bird.

CHAPTER II.

A SALE OF CATTLE.

Things were going along pretty smoothly just at present at the Black Mountain Ranch. Rossiter, the lawyer, who had been fighting the young rough riders for the ownership of the property, had gone back to the East and had not been heard from recently. Earl Rossiter, his son, who had been Ted's most determined enemy, had also left the town. A short time before Ted had saved him from death by drowning at the risk of his own life, and had nursed him at the Black Mountain Ranch for a day until he was able to go off again. Earl had thanked Ted for this, but had said nothing more. He had left Crook City on an east-bound train, and, so far as the young rough riders knew, he had gone for good.

This cleared the atmosphere up considerably in the neighborhood of Crook City and Black Mountain, for the fight between the Rossiters and Ted Strong had been so bitter as to cause a great deal of excitement through all that part of Dakota. So far as the ill temper Kit Summers had shown was concerned, it had been noticed by none of the boys except Ted himself.

Ted said nothing about it, but went into dinner with the rest of the fellows, apparently cheerful and unconcerned.

The girls had agreed to stay for dinner, and the boys were on their good behavior during the meal. They were just settling down to pitch into the food set before them when hooffalls sounded on the ground outside and a man dismounted in front of the porch. He tied his horse to the snubbing post, and then stepped in through the open door. He was a tall, well set-up fellow, about twenty-five or thirty years of age, and wore the undress uniform of a U. S. Army officer. All the boys rose to their feet at his entrance, and Ted stepped forward to welcome him.

"I am Lieut. Ransom of the commissary department of the U. S. Army. Am I right in supposing this to be the Black Mountain Ranch?" he said, making a sweeping bow for the benefit of the ladies.

"You've struck it," said Ted. "And you are welcome to it. Sit down and have some grub with us."

"Then, if I am not mistaken, this must be Mr. Ted Strong," said Lieut. Ransom. "I've heard of you before. Shake."

The army officer extended his hand, and Ted grasped it heartily.

Then the formality of introducing Ransom to the other members of the party was gone through, and a chair was placed for him at the table.

"I must admit that I've had a long ride and that I feel pretty hungry," said Ransom. "You fellows seem to keep a pretty good line of grub here. This steak is great, and I can tell you that hot bread and coffee is a good deal better than hard tack and alkali water with a little bacon on the side. That's what I've been living on lately. I've come down from the Blackfoot reservation, and have been going about from ranch to ranch so I couldn't take the train."

Ransom pitched into his food with a vigor that showed he meant what he said, and it was not until he had cleaned his plate more than once that he sat back in his chair with a satisfied sigh and looked at Ted.

"I've come to see you on business, Mr. Strong," he said, "but I was so hungry and your grub here looked so good that I just had to fill up before I could get ready to talk business."

"Dot iss right," said Carl Schwartz. "As der boet says mit so much sweetness, 'Bleasure must come first mit der pusiness afterwards.'"

"Weally," said Jack Slate, "I wathah think that you have got that quotation wong. As I wecollect it, it wan——"

"Never mind borin' in with your auger now," interrupted Fox Quirk. "Caint ye see thet ther captin' an' ther lootenant has some business ter talk over. Let's get outside a bit and tune up and sing some fer ther gals."

The ladies agreed to this proposal readily enough, and they presently all trooped out to the veranda, leaving Ted Strong and the army officer alone together, with the exception of Pomp, who remained in the room to clear off the dishes. Lieut. Ransom opened the conversation.

"I'm on business here for the government," he said.

"I'm looking for about a thousand good, fat two-year-old steers. I've been to all the ranches in the vicinity, and I must say that the general average of the cattle around this vicinity is pretty low. I heard about your herd. They are all longhorns, I believe."

"All longhorns except a few stray shorthorns that drifted in with us on a stampede we had here lately."

"I heard about that stampede," said Ransom. "I believe that some queer things have gone on about here. A gentleman named Roaring Bill Reynolds, who has the honor of being the sheriff for this county, had something to do with that stampede, if I am not mistaken."

"I believe he did," said Ted, with a smile. "But we managed to head off the stampede fortunately, and we only lost a few cows by it."

"So I heard," said Ransom. "Your reputation as a cow puncher has traveled about considerably since you came out here. Have a cigar?"

Ted declined the cigar, and the lieutenant lit one himself.

"Roaring Bill Reynolds has something to do with my errand here," continued Ransom, puffing up a cloud of fragrant smoke and lounging back comfortably in his chair. "He's quite a character around here and has a big reputation as a bad man, but his election to the office of sheriff gave him a little standing he would not have gained otherwise. Last year we were looking for a man to supply the cattle for the Indians up at the Blackfoot agency. There's a pretty husky bunch of redskins up there, and they manage to eat up a healthy amount of beef. Roaring Bill took on hand to supply a thousand of them, and, seeing that he was a sheriff, we depended on him. We thought that he would be able to live up to his contract if he had to rustle the cows to do it. He backed down lately. We got a note from him a week ago, when the cows were to be delivered, that he couldn't supply them. He said that he was sick from a gunshot wound."

"I think that I may know a little about that gunshot wound myself," said Ted, with a grim smile.

Ransom looked sharply at the smooth, handsome face before him.

"You don't look such a terror as a fighter with guns as you're credited with being," he said. "You look rather young for a fellow who has gone through all that you have gone through."

"Never mind about that," smiled Ted. "Let's get back to the cows. I suppose that you want to buy some from me to make up for the bunch that Roaring Bill failed to get to you."

"That's just about it," said Ransom. "You have the only good cows in the vicinity. I looked over your herd as they were bedding down just before I came up and saw for myself that they were corkers. I'd heard that this was a sort of amateur tenderfoot ranch, and I expected to see a pretty measly bunch of cows when I got here, but I must say that they are about the finest steers I've looked at in a long time."

"We've got a pretty good location for a ranch here, and we've had pretty good luck."

"I want a thousand of your cows," said Ransom. "I'm willing to pay the last fall market price for them, but I must have them quick. I haven't anybody with me to take charge of the herd, so I hope that you'll be able to deliver them at the Blackfoot agency yourself."

"That's a pretty long journey—all the way to Montana," said Ted. "I'm pretty sure that I can get a better price for the steers right here at Crook City later on in the year, and ship them East on the railroad. If I'm not mistaken, I'll have to send them on the trail overland to the Blackfoot agency, as there is no railroad communication between it and Crook City."

"Yes, you will," admitted Ransom. "You'll have to send your own men with the cattle."

"I don't feel that I can spare the men from the ranch at present," said Ted. "Besides, I can't say that I'm in any particular hurry to sell."

Ransom's face fell, and he looked quite disappointed.

"Then you don't want to sell them to me?" he asked.

"I don't feel very keen about it," said Ted, "and I want to tell you something. You walked in here thinking that I was a kid who could easily be jollied. You made a lot of talk about my reputation just to get me into good humor. I know just as well as you do

that no ranchman wants to sell cows at this time of year. Your jolly didn't work worth a cent."

What Ted said might have offended the army officer had it not been accompanied by a kindly smile, which showed that the young rough rider was in perfect good humor.

"I'll admit that I did try to talk a little pleasant to you," said Ransom, at length, "but I beg your pardon for it. I can't pay you more than the regular market price for the cows, because that is all that is allowed me by the commissary department. I've got to get them some way or other. There's plenty of good cattle about here, but nobody's willing to sell now."

"And you thought you could jolly me into selling because I was a tenderfoot," said Ted.

Ransom smiled sheepishly, and then his face assumed a worried look.

"I had to do something," he said. "If those Indians don't get enough to eat up there they'll go on the warpath sure, and there'll be a lot of life lost. I did try to throw it into you a little, but I was doing it in a good cause. I was doing it to save an Indian war and a lot of loss of life. Just as sure as those Blackfeet at the reservation find that the White Father, in Washington, isn't giving them their beef regular, they'll get out on the warpath and shoot things up. It means death to a whole lot of them, and hard times for the army boys all through the winter. But, I suppose, there is no use talking to you about it."

Lieut. Ransom rose to his feet.

"Sit down a minute," said Ted; "what you have told me put's another light on the case. If by selling you the cattle I prevent an Indian war and bloodshed, you get the cattle. I'll have a thousand of them started for the Blackfoot reservation by sunrise to-morrow. I'm for Uncle Sam every time!"

Ransom stared for a moment in silence at the boy who had now risen to his feet.

Then he made Ted a handsome bow.

"Mr. Ted Strong," he said, "if ever you get around to our reservation we'll give you the best time you ever had in your life. Or, if ever you happen to drop into the East and wind up at New York just make your

way to the army and navy club, and you'll get the best treatment the army boys can give to a friend. I'll tell the other boys about you, and I want you to remember that you have a whole lot of friends among the regulars from now on. You're one of the few men I ever met who can appreciate what we have to fight against in keeping these redskins quiet."

"Thanks," said Ted. "Let's get out now and see about starting the cows off in the morning."

CHAPTER III.

KIT SUMMERS MAKES TROUBLE.

When Ted and Lieut. Ransom went out of the ranch house the girls, together with Mrs. Dunton, were just taking their departure.

Kit Summers was standing beside the buckboard in which they had come talking earnestly to Louise Rossiter. He was evidently paying not the slightest attention to Kate Lamont, to whom he had formerly been so devoted.

This was Kit's way of showing his jealousy. He thought that there was some kind of an understanding between Ted Strong and Kate, and he refused to even look at Kate, scarcely answering the girl when she spoke to him.

At first Kate was puzzled at this and could not believe her ears. She had known Kit some time now, and had never known him to do anything rude before.

"Are you going to ride back with us, Kit?" she asked.

Kit paid no attention to her but stared in another direction, and she repeated her question in a louder tone.

Kit stared past her.

"I'm going to ride along a bit to talk to some of the other girls," he said, coldly. "I don't see that it interests you, however."

"But it does interest me," said Kate, smiling good-naturedly and taking a step nearer to the boy. "Are you angry at me, Kit? Have I done anything to displease you?"

Kit stared at her insolently.

"Why should I be angry at you?" he asked. "I haven't been noticing much what you were doing. Besides, it needn't bother you whether I'm angry or not."

"What's the matter, Kit?"

"Nothing's the matter at all," said Kit, "except that I don't feel much like talking now. There's Ted Strong out on the porch there with a new army officer he has picked up. He seems to be good-looking. Why don't you go and flirt with him."

These last words were said with a sneer which no girl would have failed to notice. Kate felt it, and her cheeks flamed with anger. She had thought that Kit was in bad humor over something, and had been trying to make friends with him. Now she was angry herself, for she had never been called a flirt in her life before.

She turned away from Kit and walked off without a word.

Kit watched her as Bud Morgan helped her into the buckboard. Kate really felt very badly at the way in which Kit had treated her, but she felt too much pride to show it. She joked with Bud as he assisted her into the buckboard, and appeared perfectly happy and unconcerned. Then Ted Strong and Lieut. Ransom came down from the porch and started to talk to the girls. Kit, drawn off by himself a little distance, watched them laughing and chatting and heard snatches of their talk.

He could see Kate's eyes resting on the handsome face of Ted Strong, and he ground his teeth together and strode back into the house with something that sounded very like an oath on his lips. He threw himself into an armchair and watched through an open window as the buckboard drove away. It was early, and darkness had not yet come on. As the buckboard was driven by an able-bodied cow hand from the Dunton Ranch, there was no need of an escort. Several of the boys volunteered to ride off with the buggy, and everyone of them would have been glad to do so, but Ted said that he had work for all hands that would keep everyone busy for the greater part of the evening.

The buckboard finally rolled off across the prairie followed by a volley of cheers, and Ted Strong, accompanied by Ransom and the rest of the boys, went off toward the part of the mesa where the cattle were bedded down. There was one man who remained behind, however. This was Jack Slate.

He felt pretty sore over the fact that he had not been permitted to escort the girls home. Jack fancied himself a good deal as a lady killer, and lost no time in making an attempt to work his way into the good graces of every girl he met. This time he thought he had made quite an impression on Louise Rossiter, and the fact that he had to let her go off while he went to work among the cattle and dust of the ranch, disgusted him. On the pretext that he wished to change his riding boots, he went back into the ranch house and encountered Kit in the dining room.

"Heard the news, Kit?" he asked. "We're selling a thousand head of cattle to the government, and we are all going over with them all the way to the Blackfoot Ranch in Montana. The cowboys, with Beanpole and Josh Durkin, are to be left here on the ranch. The rest of us are going on the trail."

"Did Ted sell his cattle to that army officer who was here?" asked Kit, with an angry ring in his voice.

"Sure," said Jack. "Why, weally, don't you know he just signed the papahs, old chap, to sell a thousand of them to the Blackfoot agency to feed the Indians."

"He's a fool," said Kit. "Doesn't he know any better than that. He's getting cheated."

"But, weally, old chap, those Indians are hungwy. They need the beef. If they don't get it they'll be simply bahbawous. They will come down and mas-sacwe eweverybody. It's weally a chawity to let them have the beef."

"You're crazy," said Kit. "What do I care about the Blackfoot Indians? They're nothing to me, and I'm a partner in this ranch. Ted has no right to go off and sell cattle without our agreeing to it. He didn't even consult me about it."

"But he's wunning things, don't you know?"

"Yes, I guess he is running things. I'll see whether he's going to run them just the way he wants or not."

I've had about enough of his domineering ways. I'm getting tired of the whole business. I'm part owner of this ranch. I've got a right to say where the cattle goes as well as Ted Strong has. But people come kowtowing to Ted Strong as though he were the head of all creation. He acts that way, I must say, and his bluff goes with a lot of people. It went with me for a while, but it won't go any further. He's got a swelled head, and, because an officer in the army comes and makes a lot of complimentary talk to him, he goes off the handle entirely and sells the finest herd of cattle for miles around for government beef and at government prices. Why, we'll be the laughingstock of every ranger in Dakota. That dough boy that came down after our cattle has been scouting around for a week. He'd have been willing to take any kind of cows, and Ted sells him ours, which are the best in the county."

"But Ted's wunning the wanch. He's got a wight to sell the steeahs, and he only did it to save the wisk of an Indian upwising."

"Indian upwising," said Kit, sneeringly imitating Jack's dandified accent. "He'll have an Indian upwising right here on his own ranch, and I'll be the Indian."

Kit rose hastily to his feet and pulled his sombrero over his head.

"I say, old chap, what's up. Don't be wash. What are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do?" said Kit; "I'll tell you. I'm going to stop him from settling things all his own way. I'm part owner of this ranch. You have a share in it yourself. So has everyone of the boys. I'm going to keep him from selling those cows."

"But the boys will all vote against you and a majowity wules," said Jack.

"Yes, they'll all vote against me," speered Kit. "They'll do anything Ted tells them to. I know that well enough. They let him lead them around by the nose as though they were a pack of sheep. But I'm going to put a stop to it this time. I'll put a spoke in his wheel. He'll never deliver those cows to the Blackfoot agency. You fellows are a gang of muffs. There

isn't enough brains in the whole crowd of you to fill a hazel nut. Because Ted happens to be a good shot you let him do just whatever he wants with you. I've got just as much right to be the leader here as he has."

"I say, old chap," put in Jack, good-naturedly, "weally, now, I think you're coming it a bit too stwong. What do you intend to do?"

"I'll tell you what I intend to do," said Kit, "and you can go and tell Ted Strong just as soon as ever you feel like it. I'm going to clear right out of here and go up to MacGregor, where there's a courthouse and a judge. I owned a big share of this ranch before I went partners with Ted Strong. I'll get an injunction against you fellows to prevent you from delivering the cows to the Blackfoot agency. We'll soon learn, then, how far Ted can carry things his own way."

"Don't be silly," said Jack. "What good will the injunction do you. Before you ever get it we'll be halfway to Montana."

"You will, eh?" said Kit. "Well, there happens to be a telegraph station at MacGregor and a few other towns you'll have to pass on your way to the Blackfoot agency. I'll get my injunction all right, and I'll have the authorities at MacGregor telegraph all along the trail to watch for you chaps. When a bunch of trail cutters and rangers march in on Ted Strong and take his herd away from him he'll find out whether he has been so smart as he thought he was."

"I say, old chap, you're in a tempeh now. Don't do anything wash. You may wegwet it."

"Bah," ejaculated Kit. "Get out of my way with your sissy talk. Ted Strong has all you fellows hypnotized, but he can't pull the wool over my eyes any longer. Just run and tell him all that I've told you. Get out of my way. I'm going to quit this place for keeps."

Kit pushed Jack away from him and dashed out. It was dark by this time, and he was mounted on a horse and galloping away across the mesa before Jack caught sight of him again. Jack knew that it was no use trying to follow him, so he set himself to find Ted Strong to tell him what had happened.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HERD GETS UNDER WAY.

The task of finding Ted Strong proved itself to be a harder one than Jack had expected it to be. Down in the darkness of the prairie several flaring torches were blazing and Jack made his way to these. He found that Fox Quirk and Three-Finger Ike were here getting things in preparation for the morning. At the same moment Bud Morgan cantered up, his flaxen hair and fair, boyish face showing strangely in the flaring torchlight.

"Where is Ted Strong?" asked Jack. "I've got something of importance to tell him."

"You'd better get a good, big megaphone and whisper it out on the prairie, then," said Bud. "Ted might hear it, and he might not."

"Where is he?" asked Jack.

"He's down at Crook City by this time, and I've got some orders from him for you. Ted's getting a wagon down at Crook City. Beanpole is with him, and they are fitting it out with grub for the bunch. You and I and Kit Summers are to start the herd off at day-break. We are to take a thousand head. There's no time to be lost. Ted is buying the mules and the grub wagon for the trail down in Crook City, and he'll take a short cut and drive part of the night. We'll pick up with him some twenty miles on our road toward the Blackfoot Agency some time to-morrow. How does that strike you, my swell pard? And where is Kit Summers?"

"That's just what all the twouble is about," said Jack, with a despairing face. "Kit's run away on his horse. He's gone to MacGwegah. He's going to get an injunction to stop Ted from selling the cattle. He says it's bad business."

Bud's jaw dropped, and he stared at Jack with wide-open blue eyes.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" he cried, "what is this yer a-tellin' me of. Get yer talkin' tackle limbered up a little, pard. Tell me what's it all about. Kit's gone to MacGregor! And what in the name of all the jumpin' sandhills does he mean by such conduct. Is he crazy?"

"I guess he is cwazy," said Jack. "He's vewy angwy, anyway. He looked simply despawate as he wode off."

"I'll get desprit myself an' ride my brook around yer neck like it was a three ring circus ef ye don't explain quick an' put me out of my agony. Doesn't he know that Ted's selling these steers to prevent a Black-foot uprising?"

"He says that Indian upwising are none of our business."

"Oh, they're not, eh? And he's goin' ter try and stop us from deliverin' them ther cattle. Of all the low-down mavericks! I allers thought Kit was a pretty square kid, too. Doesn't he know what an Indian uprising is? If he ever saw a man scalped he wouldn't be so quick in his actions. By the jumpin' sandhills."

Bud broke off in a string of language which it would be impossible to print here. It lasted five minutes or so, and he never repeated himself once, and during that five minutes the air about him was so blue that it seemed to fairly reek with sulphur. Finally his vocabulary ran out, and he sat still on his horse panting for breath.

"Say, Jack," he said, suddenly, "I'm all struck of a heap. Will ye kindly come ter my rescue and tell me what day of the week this is."

"Fwiday," said the astonished Jack Slate. "What do you want to know that for?"

"It's important, pard," said Bud, slowly. "It has a bearin' on the possible fate of our guide, philosopher and friend, who seems to have suddenly let his cinches slip and gone off his range. Ef it was Monday I would give him a week in the hospital. Seein' its Friday, I calkilate as how he'll only get about seventeen pounds of buckshot fired through his hat."

"What has the day of the week to do with it, and why will he get hurt?"

"I'll tell ye how it is, my cute little pard," said Bud, riveting Jack with his eye and gesticulating with his right hand. "It's just about like this. There happens ter be a jedge of the soopreme court of ther State of Dakoty, who has his seat in MacGregor. Our hilarious

comrade, with the buck-jumpin' temper, seems to have acquired a working knowledge of this here fact in a vague an' rudimentary way. So he goes off to git his injunction from this here judge. But he doesn't know what manner of man the judge is. I know the judge there. His name is Blinky Finn, an' I wunst worked at ranchin' with him up near Wind River. Now Blinky is a man of the most regular habits, and he's a Western judge, not havin' the customs nor manners of the Eastern an' effete justiciary of Noo York or thereabouts. He's a simple an' untrammelled child of nature, Blinky is, with all the breezy vigor an' unconventionality of ther Western perairies clingin' about him like some delikit aromer. It is his pleasin' custom to transact all ther business connected with his lofty and noble office on Monday. On Tuesday he begins to souse up at the nearest barroom. He thinks this is a pleasin' an' manly relaxation from his legal labors, an' he continues the process for the rest of the week. On Tuesday he is a howlin' fiend, an' if a man meets him and don't drink a half bottle of neat whisky promptly and cheerfully at his invitation, ther man stands an excellent chanst of gettin' shot. Through the rest of the week the judge keeps gettin' mellerer an' mellerer. By Friday it is mighty hard fer him ter navigate, but it is still possible fer him ter hang onter ther rim of the bar and call for more red liquor. He still maintains ther playful habit of shootin' up all pilgrims who do anything but consume whisky in his presence. His hand is feeble and his aim is oncertain owin' ter his nervousness, which attacks him about this time of the week, but he allers has a few cartridges left in his belt.

"Now Kit'll drift inter MacGregor expectin' ter see a neat and tidy Eastern judge presidin' at the bar of justice. He'll find Blinky presidin' at ther saloon bar. He'll steer up ter him an' broach ther subject of an injunction. Now if there's anything the judge hates it is ter talk shop out of business hours, and as I said before his business hours are all on Monday of each week. When he finds Kit guilty of sech bad form he'll promptly unlimber with a sawed off shotgun he carries and do his judicial best ter pump him full of holes.

Bein' it's so late in the week, Kit may make his escape if he's a good runner and side steps mighty quick after he broaches his business. That's all."

Bud wheeled his horse suddenly and rode back to the house. Jack followed him, a good deal puzzled at the remarkable narration he had just listened to, but he could get nothing more out of Bud that night. Neither of them slept very much, and at earliest daybreak they were in their saddles.

The other cowboys had already cut out a thousand of the herd, and Jack and Bud, well mounted and each carrying a complete camping outfit, started out on their long trail for the Blackfoot agency, following slow upon the rear of the grazing cattle. Fox Quirk and Three-Finger went with them to help care for the herd until they met with the others.

All four knew something about handling cows, and the herd was soon well under way streaming out across the prairie in a great procession of grazing animals, moving slowly forward like a mighty serpent as far as the eye could reach.

CHAPTER V.

INDIAN SIGNS.

The point where Ted Strong intended to meet the herd on the trail was not twenty miles from Black Mountain, as Bud Morgan had said, but a good deal nearer than that. The herd had started at daybreak. They were all long-legged Texas steers, in splendid condition, and although they grazed freely when the dew was on the grass, they made good time, pushing forward at a rate that kept the horsemen following at a rapid walk.

Both Bud Morgan and Jack Slate led with them several extra horses for remounts. This is a necessary thing for a cowboy, for one cow pony can never stand the wear and tear of herding cattle on the trail.

It was a little before noon when they sighted, far over the prairie, a thin column of smoke rising straight and clear up into the windless air.

Then, presently, the white pitched tent of a wagon

appeared above a rise in the prairie and several horses could be seen tethered near it.

Ten minutes later the herd was turned off the trail for a noonday rest, and Bud Morgan and Jack were in camp with Ted Strong and the rest of the party. Pomp was there presiding over the camp fire with his usual cheerful grin, and preparations for the noonday meal were well under way.

"I thought I would camp here and wait a little for you, so as to have dinner ready," said Ted, as they rode up. "Where's Kit?"

"He's gone," said Jack Slate. "He's quit the camp entirely."

Then he and Bud Morgan proceeded to explain as well as they could Kit's actions of the night before.

Ted listened gravely and in silence. More than once his eyes flashed and it looked as if his temper were rising within him, but when the recital was concluded he spoke in calm, unmoved tones.

"I'm sorry for this," he said. "Kit is making a big mistake. If he objected to the financial loss he might have come to me about it and I would have made it good out of my own pocket. Do you think, Bud, that he can stop us in any way?"

Bud shook his head and laughed.

"He's only makin' a durn fool out of himself. Jumpin' sandhills! Blinky won't listen ter him fer a minute—not fer a minute. If he doesn't make him get drunk in fear of swallerin' five or six buckshots injected inter him from ther muzzle of a gun he'll just laugh at him. Kit will get over his bad temper and come a-trottin' back here with his tail atween his legs just like a whipped dog. Kit is all right, but he's a good deal of a kid yet. He's got a lot ter learn about keepin' his temper an' not a-goin' off at half cock, an' ther sooner he learns it ther better."

"Well, there's nothing more for us to do about it," said Ted; "I'm sorry that Kit feels angry with me, and I'm sorry on account of our business, too, for it leaves me a man short. But it can't be helped. It's our duty to get this herd forward as fast as possible, and we have no time to waste over Kit Summers. Let's have dinner now and say no more about it."

Fox Quirk and Three-Finger Ike sat down to dinner with the boys, and after the meal remounted and cantered away back toward the ranch.

Then Bud Morgan and Jack Slate, together with Pomp, got on their cow ponies and started the herd.

Beanpole was relegated for the present to the task of driving the grub wagon, for Pomp was a better horseman than he was, and more experienced in handling cattle. Beanpole was decidedly disappointed at this, for driving a mule team seemed an inglorious fate for a boy who aspired to live the life of a full-fledged cow puncher.

There was nothing else for it, however. Kit's absence made the party in charge of the herd so short-handed that every man had to be used to the very best advantage and favors could be extended to no one.

Beanpole consoled himself with the reflection that driving the mules would rest his nerves up a bit and finally became resigned to his position.

So the herd moved forward again, a long serpentine procession, with Pomp, the negro, riding in front, to indicate the direction, and Ted and Bud Morgan bringing up the rear. The prairie seemed as flat as a pancake, and the afternoon sun beat down upon their heads with pitiless heat. The cows moved at a slow, monotonous pace, so that Beanpole, who had eaten as heartily as usual at dinner, soon dropped off to sleep on the seat of the mule wagon, while the mules, with the reins hanging loose on their backs, drifted forward following the trail at their own sweet will.

Neither Bud nor Ted were very much disposed to talk. Bud was rather sleepy, for he had been up the greater part of the night before helping Ted get things ready to go on the trail. As for Ted, he was thinking deeply about Kit Summers.

He had formed a deep friendship for the dark-eyed boy, and although at first his running off had angered him a great deal, more than he had shown in his manner, the temporary irritation soon passed away. At present there was more sorrow than anger in his heart, for he felt that Kit would only injure himself in any impulsive acts his temper might lead him into.

He was a little puzzled at first, for Kit's anger

seemed to him unreasonable and uncalled for, but he knew Kit well enough to decide that there must be some real or imagined cause at the bottom of his queer actions. He remembered that Kit had treated him in a very distant manner for the past week or so, and he decided to see him and have a good talk to clear matters up just as soon as he was at liberty to look him up. For the present, however, his duty was to stay with the herd, and he did not intend to let any personal inclination come in the way of the performance of his duty.

As the sun dropped lower and lower in the west, the cattle began to lose their noonday drowsiness and move ahead more quickly. Beanpole presently woke up with a start, and nearly fell off the hard seat of the chuck wagon.

The effort he made to save himself caused him to jerk violently the reins, and the next moment the team of mules, thoroughly startled at the sudden twitch they had been given, had started away at their top speed.

When Thaddeus fell asleep he had been dreaming that he was driving a stage-coach on the old Deadwood trail which he had read about so often. Now, in his first moments of waking, he imagined that a party of bandits had opened fire upon him, and that he had whipped up his horses to escape from them.

He had forgotten completely about the herd of cattle or his position as driver of the chuck wagon, and when he saw Bud Morgan and Ted Strong riding toward him on one side, and Jack Slate spurring up on the other he imagined that they were the bandits of whom he had been dreaming.

The other boys had been going to his assistance to help him stop the mules.

Imagine their surprise when Thaddeus, his hair standing on end through fear, leaned out from the seat of the wagon and lashed the mules with the loose end of the reins.

"Out of my way, you villains," he screamed. "You won't hold me up here. I'll escape you yet. I have a Winchester under the seat of this wagon and I'll fire upon you."

"Pull up them there mules," yelled Bud, "or ye'll run plumb inter their herd. Are ye crazy?"

"I have no treasure aboard," yelled the frenzied Beanpole. "I tell you that I am carrying no gold. It will not be worth your while to rob me."

Bud made a grab for the reins of the mules as they thundered past him, but missed them.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" he yelled, "this feller's gone crazy, too, er I'm a maverick. First Kit goes crazy an' then our lanky friend takes ter eatin' loco weed and goes offen his handle. Look at him. Would ye look at him? He'll be plumb in among the cattle next with the grub wagon. Pull up, ye thunderin' fool er I'll pump ye full o' lead."

Fortunately for the safety of the herd, the mule team slewed off to one side and Thaddeus, in the wagon, went careening away across the prairie with Bud Morgan, his long hair streaming in the wind, in hot pursuit.

Ted had noticed that Thaddeus was asleep in the wagon, and he knew that the lanky youth frequently had nightmares, especially after a heavy meal. He had a pretty clear idea of what had happened to Beanpole, and as there was no danger of the herd being stampeded now, he burst into a hearty fit of laughter.

Bud heard it behind him, and was more surprised than ever.

"Great jumpin' sandhills!" he said to himself. "Listen ter that. There's a man what sees a loonytic drivin' away acrost ther trackless perairie with all ther grub he has, an' instid of tryin' ter catch him he sits back in his saddle an' laffs. They're all crazy. They've all been shore eatin' loco weed. First Kit goes offen his handle. Then this here maniac takes one of his vi'lent fits and runs off with ther grub waggin. Then Ted himself begins ter act as though it was all a joke an' laughs, too. Perhaps I'm crazy, too, but I'm goin' ter chase that thier' ijiot an' find out whether it's him or me who's nutty."

Bud put the quirt to his pony, and after a little chase began to overhaul the wagon. By this time Beanpole had come to his senses and stopped dreaming, and when Bud ranged alongside he had pulled the mules

to a walk and was trying to turn them back towards the trail.

Bud looked at him warily. He more than half expected Beanpole to spring at him in another fit of insanity.

"Pull up them there mules," he commanded. "I don't take no guff from crazy men. Climb down offen that wagon. A loonytic's no kind of a man ter be drivin' a grub waggin."

"But I'm not a loonytic," said Beanpole, bringing his mules to a standstill.

"Ye are," said Bud. "I kin see it in yer eye. If yer not locoed, why in thunder didn't ye pull up? And what did ye mean by yellin' out all that stuff about havin' a Winchester under ther seat an' havin' no gold aboard? Whoever thought ye had gold aboard a chuck wagon, and what in the name of all the jumpin' sand-hills did ye mean by tryin' ter tell me ye had a Winchester under ther seat?"

"I was dreaming," exclaimed Thaddeus, jumping to the ground. "I had a nightmare, and when I woke up the horses were running away, and I didn't know what was happening to me. I'm not crazy. I was only dreaming."

Bud took a careful look at Beanpole before answering.

He saw that the slender youth appeared sane enough and that he was talking perfectly sensibly now.

"Well, if it's a fact as ye were only dreaming," he said, at length, "I'll give ye a little quiet piece of advice which it might be well for ye to tuck off in one corner of your hat, so you could look at it an' refresh yer memory every now an' then. It's this: Don't never do no more dreamin' while yer out West, unless yer safe in yer bunk at ther Black Mountain Ranch. It's dangerous. Some feller might take ye fer a stage robber or a hoss thief while yer havin' some o' these golden dreams o' youth, an' ye would wake up with a few ounces o' lead ramblin' around yer anatomy. Don't dream any more."

"I won't," promised Thaddeus, humbly. Then he turned to climb back into the wagon, but stopped in amazement to look at Bud Morgan.

The cowboy had suddenly dropped from his saddle and was now on all fours, scrutinizing the ground eagerly.

"What is it you see there?" asked Thaddeus.

"I see a whole lot of things," said Bud, after another long examination of the ground.

"What sort of things?" inquired Thaddeus.

"One of them is that there's a pretty good-sized bunch of Indians out loose in these parts. All good Indians are in their reservations, and these here fellers must be on the warpath or lookin' fer fodder of some kind. An' we've got a herd of a thousand cattle an' only five men to take care of it."

CHAPTER VI.

KIT SUMMERS IN DANGER.

Ted Strong and Jack Slate had not ridden after Bud in his pursuit of the grub wagon, but remained back on the trail watching him give chase.

They saw him catch up with Thaddeus, and then saw the two conversing together. Then, when they expected Bud Morgan to ride back to the trail, they saw him drop from the back of his horse and fall to examining the ground on all fours.

"He's found something there," said Ted; "I wonder what it is?"

"Maybe it's a gold mine," hazarded Jack. "Let's go and see. The cows will run right along the trail for an hour yet. We can easily catch up with them."

"All right," said Ted, "I'm just spoiling for a canter myself," and away they went across the prairie to where Beanpole and Bud Morgan were still standing beside the wagon.

Bud wore a very grave face as the other two rode up.

"It's pretty lucky, boss, that we pulled up here," he said to Ted. "I found something that may change our plans in regard to handling the herd."

He pointed to a mass of charred ashes and the marks of many unshod hoofprints on the hard soil of the prairie.

"Indians," he said; "and if I'm not mistaken twenty or more of them."

Ted leaped from his pony and also examined the ground.

"There's been all of that here," he said, at length, "but it's some days since they came here. These tracks are rather old."

"There's sure some Sioux Indians loose somewhere about," said Bud. "The Indian agents out here have been stealin' a little too much government money lately instead of spending it for grub for the reds. Consequently there's a bunch of them out here grub huntin'."

"Isn't it possible that these tracks might be those of Chief Frosthead and his braves down at the Red Cliffs?" asked Thaddeus.

Frosthead was an Indian with whom Ted Strong had some dealings some weeks before. The incident had ended in the pledging of friendship between Frosthead's braves and the band of young rough riders, and if these Indian tracks turned out to be those of the Red Cliff savages, Ted Strong need have no fear for the safety of his cattle.

Ted shook his head, however, as he looked at the tracks.

"Chief Frosthead's men never left this trail. They are well enough off and comfortable where they are. They have plenty of game up there in the Red Cliffs, and the chief is far too wise an old boy to start out this way. The men that left these tracks are either Sioux or Chippewas, if I am not mistaken."

"I guess you're about right, thar," said Bud. "There's two or three pretty wild gangs up about here an' game has been scarce down this way lately. That's a hunting party, if I'm not mistaken, an' when they get started they are terrors. An Injun nowadays doesn't go on the warpath through pure devilment. He's got enough devilment to do it, all right, but he's too wise. He knows that sooner or later the boys in blue will get after him an' make him wish he hadn't. But when game gits scarce an' he finds that he has to draw his waistband tighter an' tighter every day he begins to git discontented with his lot. Then he gits ter thinkin' that he might be able to cop out a few cows

here or there. Then all he needs is a good, stiff drink of firewater ter make him mix war medicine, dance the scalp an' go out crow hoppin' on the trail with blood in his eye fer everybody he meets. It's a hungry, discontented man that gits ambitious ter conquer ther world an' it applies to Indians jest ther same as white men. If everybody was happy an' contented with his lot none of us wouldn't ever start out an' strive ter be great heroes."

Ted looked at Bud for a moment in silence.

"I guess you struck the mark that time, Bud," he said. "If a man is perfectly contented he won't make much of a mark in the world. But that has nothing to do with the subject under discussion. We have a herd of a thousand nice fat steers. There's only five of us, and there's about fifty hungry Indians camping about this prairie somewhere or other. When they see those nice fat steers they are liable to get hungrier than ever, and to forget that the steers are intended for their equally hungry red brothers up at the Black-foot agency. If we run up against them we are likely to have trouble, but from the trail here I should judge that the redskins have gone off in the other direction."

Bud began to examine the trail again, following it on foot for several hundred yards. Then he came back, running awkwardly on his high-heeled cowboy boots. His face wore a relieved expression.

"They have gone off to the south," he said, "an' the chances air that we won't see no more of them. They've cut over towards MacGregor and like enough they'll start in to make trouble with any lonely pedestrians they run acrost, but we're all right. Salt Licks are only twenty miles ahead of us. There's a settlement there an' we can bed the cattle down there if we make a night march of it an' keep on till we get there. We'll be safe enough there till we do a little scoutin' an' find out how the land lays. Git on yer ponies ag'in, boys, an' foller ther herd. We're all right."

"But I don't think that we are all right yet," said Ted.

"What else is the matter?" asked Jack Slate.

"It's Kit Summers that I'm worrying about," said

Ted. "He'll run right into that bunch of Indians if I read the trail right."

Bud had one foot in the stirrup to mount when Kit's name was mentioned.

He dropped back to the ground, pushed his hat forward on his head and began to run his fingers through his long yellow hair. His lean, eager face was twisted into an expression of doubt and perplexity.

"Kit Summers will run inter those fellers like as not," said he. "But that ain't none of our funeral. They'll give him a good scare an' teach him ter be a good little boy after this. Why should we worry about him?"

"But I do worry about him," said Ted.

"Yer ther derndest man I ever seed," said Bud. "Here's a chap starts out ter do yer dirt. He goes off without so much as speakin' ter ye an' tries to knock ye out of keepin' a government contract, thereby running a risk of gettin' yer in jail. An' you stand here worryin' about him."

Ted's face grew a little sterner as he looked at Bud.

"It doesn't matter what he is trying to do," he said, sharply. "Kit is my friend, and I want to help him in any way I can. What he is doing may seem mean to you, but I think that I can understand how he feels. He can't do us any harm, anyhow, and if I'm not mistaken he's in danger now."

"It don't matter whether he's able to do us any harm or not," said Thaddeus, "he's trying his best to do it, all right. The fact that he doesn't succeed doesn't make his fault any the less."

"I'm not here to judge of Kit's faults," said Ted. "No man has a right to put himself in the position of a judge over any other man. He can't understand what the other fellow's motives or feelings are."

"But I don't think that Kit is in any real danger," said Bud. "These here Injuns are lookin' out fer grub. They don't want ter eat Kit, and if he lets them alone the chances air that they will let him alone."

"You may be right there," said Ted. "I'm in doubt what to do, but we have to look out for the herd, anyway. We must get it into a position of safety up at Salt Licks."

"I wathah think that something wemalikable has happened to the hehd alweady," drawled Jack. "I've been noticing the actions of that negro, Pomp. He seems to me to be acting as though he was cwazy."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud. "Has another man gone crazy?"

All turned to look in the direction of the herd and Pomp, and it certainly did look as if the negro had lost his wits. He was standing up in his stirrups waving his arms about in all directions. The herd was scattered about all over the trail, and he was paying absolutely no attention to it.

"He's calling to us," said Ted. "Something has happened and he wants to attract our attention."

The young rough rider vaulted into his saddle, his followers did likewise and a few moments later they were nearing the excited Pomp.

Pomp certainly did appear to be frightened. His eyes were wide open and rolling about in all directions. His face had not blanched any because of its inky color, but his thick lips had turned to a sickly pallor and his arms were flourished aimlessly about in the air.

"Injuns!" he cried, wildly. "Injuns ahead of us. They'll eat us up sho'."

CHAPTER VII.

A WARNING AND A NIGHT DRIVE.

It took Ted several minutes talking and soothing Pomp to get the darky back to his sober senses. Pomp, however, was easily influenced by a strong, cool nature, and presently he had recovered his control sufficiently to sit back and talk coherently.

"There's Injuns ahead of us, Marse Ted," he said, in a wavering voice. "I done see dere fedders an' bonnets. Dere mus' be millyums ob dem red debbils awaitin' an' a-lurkin' down in a wallow dere, awaitin' foh to scalp us an' cut us inter little bits."

"Get ahead there, Bud, and throw the cattle off the trail," cried Ted, in ringing tones. "Go with him, Jack and Beanpole."

The three were off like the wind at once. Ted turned to the negro and spoke to him again.

"You must come with me and show me where those Indians are," he said. "Come on; which direction are they in? Where is the buffalo wallow you spoke of?"

"I'se afraid, Marse Ted, I'se plumb afraid. Dose red debbils will scalp me. Lemme go home. I'se afraid."

"No, you are not afraid," said Ted; "you don't know what fear is. You just come along with me."

Pomp's terror had communicated itself to the horse he rode, and it was now prancing and snorting in evident fear. Ted laid his hand on its bridle and quieted it at once. Then he turned back to the mule wagon and chocked the wheels so that the mules could not run away again.

"Now, Pomp," he said, "we'll just ride along and see what those Indian fellows amount to."

Pomp was still a little terrified, but he wheeled his horse and rode off down the trail, keeping so close to Ted that they were stirrup to stirrup.

"You'se suttinly a brave man, Marse Ted," he said. "I was plumb afraid."

"You weren't afraid a bit," said Ted. "You only thought you were."

"Mebbe dat's so, but you is sho a mighty brave man."

Bad and the others had succeeded in turning the cattle off the trail by this time, and the steers were grazing along contentedly almost at a standstill. The fact that they showed no fear or uneasiness seemed to indicate that there were no redskins in the immediate vicinity, but the wind was blowing from the herd in the direction of the place where Pomp declared the savages were concealed, and so this could not be taken as an absolute sign.

"It's down dere," said Pomp. "I saw dem in dat wallow. Laws a mussy, dar's one of dem now."

Pomp gave a great gasp of surprise and nearly fell out of his saddle. And, indeed, Ted was surprised himself.

Clear against the sky line in front of them an Indian had suddenly appeared as if by magic. He had evi-

dently ridden up out of the hollow beyond, but he seemed to Ted's eyes to have sprung out of the ground.

The sun shone full upon him, showing his feathered headdress and his bronze stalwart form. He sat back in his saddle, stately as a prince, and was looking straight at them.

Ted's hand had slipped around to his revolver, but it suddenly stopped there, for the lone Indian had raised his hand palm outward.

This is the sign of peace known to all redskins and rangers from the Rio to Winnipeg. Ted's hand slipped away from the butt of his weapon and was also raised in the air.

Then the Indian moved forward. It seemed as if he and his horse were one creature, for the animal appeared to obey his will without the slightest sign to indicate what it was.

As he drew nearer and nearer, moving forward at a stately walk, his copper features came now clear and distinct in the golden sunshine. He looked as if he were a great bronze statue that had suddenly been endowed with life and the power of moving.

"It's Prettyhand!" exclaimed Ted. Then he, too, pressed forward, and Pomp, seeing now that there was no cause for fear, rode forward also to meet the lone Indian.

It was, indeed, Prettyhand, an Indian friend of Ted Strong. Ted thought that he had left him far away behind him with his father, Chief Frosthead, at the Red Cliffs, and his sudden appearance in the middle of the prairie surprised him, to say the least.

The Indian maintained his dignified silence and slow walk until he was within a few paces of Ted and his black companion. Then he raised his hand again and repeated the Indian form of salutation:

"*Hore kola!*"

"*Hore kola!*" said Ted. "And what is it that brings my red brother out so far on the prairie—so far from the tepees of his father's tribe?"

"I come to warn you," said the Indian. "Heap much friend to paleface boy chief. Hear that he goes on trail with cattle. Bad Indians out on prairie. Fifty Chippewa—lunks and young men. They have danced

the scalp and mixed the war medicine—they go on the warpath. Get to Salt Licks and the herd will be safe.”

“Where have the Chippewas gone?”

“They passed here this morning. They have gone there.” Prettyhand waved his arm out toward the southwest. “Prettyhand has watched them pass. Fifty bucks, painted and feathered. Prettyhand crouched in the grass and watched them. He had come here on a long hunt and had got no game. Then he waited, for he had heard that his white friend was coming this way.”

Ted turned and looked off toward the southwest. He knew that his herd was safe for the present, but as he looked over the great sunset sea to the westward he knew that his friend, Kit Summers, was somewhere out there on that lonely prairie, and that fifty red tigers maddened with famine were there also. His face turned a shade paler.

“Prettyhand goes now, but he warns you to stay in Salt Licks till the soldiers come with the big guns. Prettyhand must ride hard, for he would reach the tepee of his father before another sun rises.”

He was away, but Ted cast after him only a fleeting glance, for his mind was taken up with other things. The herd was still grazing off to his right, and he spurred on to the men in the lead.

“We must make a night march,” he said. “We’ll have no supper till we get to Salt Licks. It’s fifteen miles more, and we must make it before the moon sets. Thaddeus, get back to the grub wagon and drive ahead as fast as you can. I’ll lead the cows myself. We’ll have no trouble, for the night is clear and we’ll have a good moon.”

“Why all this hurry?” asked Bud. “We kin make Salt Licks any time to-night.”

“There’s so few of us here that we can’t spare a man to go after Kit Summers,” said Ted. “I’ll get the herd to Salt Licks and then I’ll start back. You fellows will be needed there to take charge of the herd. I know the direction Kit took to MacGregor. I know the way that Indian trail ran. I can take a short cut out from Salt Licks, and with good luck and hard

riding I may be able to head him off in time and get him out of the way of those Indians.”

Then, in a few words, he told the news that Prettyhand had brought in regard to a party of Chippewa Indians being on the warpath.

Bud and Jack Slate looked as if they would have liked to argue with him as to the advisability of his going back after Kit Summers. But the firm set of Ted’s lips and the squareness of his jaw was enough to indicate to them that argument would be useless. They knew that when Ted had made up his mind it was hard to shift him, and so they spurred off to do his bidding.

Then began that night drive which all the boys remembered for many a long day, as one of their most interesting experiences.

The moon came up full and unclouded, and the cattle, although they would have liked to have bedded down and rested, were driven forward unceasingly. No supper was served, for there was no time to stop for supper, and the excitement and work of keeping the cattle on the trail and on the move, together with the wonder of this strange ride over the moonlit prairie, took all thoughts of eating from their minds.

Beanpole, who drove the mule team in the rear of the herd, was the only member of the party who thought at all of creature comforts. He had little to do, as the mules followed the trail of their own accord, and for the greater part of the time the long lines hung idle, tied to the seat of the wagon, while Beanpole either munched crackers and cheese taken from the stores in the wagon or dozed uneasily on his hard wooden seat.

Steers do not care to graze in a very heavy dew, and as the dew was unusually heavy that night, they pushed forward at a good round pace, without very much urging. At first many of them lay down and tried to bed themselves as usual, but they were soon routed out of their comfortable nests and driven on with the others. By the time the moon had risen they had gotten over the lazy tendency, and were pushing forward as steadily and as willingly as though it were early in the morning and they were fresh from their long night sleep.

At first Ted rode ahead as point man, carrying with

him, slung to his saddle, the lantern which usually hung on the grub wagon.

To those behind it could be seen like a star twinkling across the prairie, and the cattle followed it.

Jack Slate and Pomp acted as swing men, riding one on either side of the herd. They had plenty of work to do, for they had a long line to cover, and were kept busy spurring up and down, checking stray heifers that showed a disposition to wander off from the main body of the herd.

In the clear, bright moonlight the trail was as plain and distinct as though it was noonday, and Ted, after getting the herd well started, relieved Pomp from his position as swing man and sent him along ahead of the herd to carry the lantern.

Bud Morgan brought up the rear, riding a little ahead of the chuck wagon, and occasionally spurring down on one or the other side of the herd to help the swing men.

After the cows were well started, however, he had little enough to do, but rode peacefully along, singing the good old rear man's song:

"Ipe-la-go, go 'long little doggie,
You'll make a beef-steer by and by."

while Ted and Jack, riding on either side of the herd, sometimes chatted across the cows that tramped between them, and sometimes rode along in silence, listening to the music of Bud's voice.

And so for mile after mile the great serpent, the herd, wound its length over the dewy, sweet-smelling prairie, and the moon climbed higher and higher in the sky. The steers began to tire a little and lag so that Bud and the swing men had to use their rawhide quirts to keep them up to their work. Beanpole began to find his hard wooden seat so uncomfortable that he could sleep no longer upon it, and Pomp, riding ahead by himself and sometimes casting a frightened glance back over the sea of horns behind him, had to check his horse now and then to allow the tired steers to come up with him.

It was hard work now keeping the herd moving,

for the steers were tired and wanted badly to lie down and sleep.

But Ted and Bud and Jack never faltered for a moment in their efforts. Whenever a steer showed any tendency of lagging behind or of stopping, a great rawhide quirt descended on his flank with a crack like the report of a gun. Then, of course, he would start forward with renewed speed and generally remember to keep going without any second reminder in the shape of a blow.

Presently, however, Pomp pulled up his horse and waved his lantern in the air.

Ted spurred ahead to join him. The moon was setting now, but before him in a great valley he could see a number of scattering lights and the outline of the Salt River as it wound its way across the prairie.

They had reached Salt Licks at last, and all that remained to be done now was to bed down the cattle for the night.

It did not take very long to do this, but before the cattle were bedded down they were allowed to go down to the Salt River and drink. And they were thirsty, too. They had made a long night march and had done very little grazing.

When steers graze freely on grass heavy with dew they have little need for drinking water, because the dew in itself furnishes a good deal to quench their thirst. But in the present case they had been driven so hard that they had little chance for grazing, and, besides that, they had been on the trail all day and half the night.

This was a wonderful march for a herd to make, and had not the Black Mountain steers been in splendid condition it would have been absolutely impossible for them to do it at all. Many of the steers were footsore and lame from the long tramp, and Ted spurred his horse among them and looked over them all. There was no chance to count the herd, as the darkness and the weariness of the cows made such an operation impossible, so Ted gave the word and led the herd down to the slowly shelving banks of the Salt River.

In spite of their fatigue the steers were so thirsty that they would have stampeded for the water as soon

as they came within smelling distance of it, had they not been held back.

Ted and his men, however, worked like Trojans and led the cows in relays to the stream, cutting them out for the purpose in bunches of fifty or so. This was the hardest work of the whole trip, for the cattle were frantic at the smell of the water, and had to be held back and checked in every direction to keep them from rushing toward it in a body.

Beanpole had been awakened up from his slumbers by this time and felt pretty fresh. He was mounted on one of the remount horses, and the chuck wagon was pitched out in the spot where it had been decided to make a camp, the mules which had dragged it so far that day and night having been tethered out to graze and sleep.

The cows were moaning pitifully for the water, and when they were led into it drank deeply. Some of them were so tired that after drinking they lay down in the shoals of the stream and would have remained there until they were imbedded in the mud had they not been routed out by the Black Mountain boys and driven back up the slope to dry ground.

Then the horses and remounts were allowed to drink deeply from the cool, placid flowing stream, and then the cows were bedded down for the remainder of the night. This operation entailed very little trouble. As soon as the boys stopped driving the cattle they dropped in their tracks and were soon sleeping soundly.

On each side of the camp of the young rough riders could be seen the twinkling camp fires of other cow outfits which had stopped over at Salt Licks for the night, and farther off other faint lights were visible, showing that some of the barrooms and gambling dens of the town were still open.

The outfit on the right of the Black Mountain boys was still wide awake, and the dark, shadowy mass of the herd could still be seen in the faint moonlight, where it was bedded out farther down the river.

The camp had hardly been pitched, when one or two cowboys came over from it and visited for a short time with the young rough riders.

Pomp was cooking a midnight supper over the camp

fire, which had just been lit, and the newcomers, who were bronzed, rough-looking, reckless fellows, were invited to join in the repast with true frontier hospitality.

They accepted, nothing loath, and ate heartily along with the other boys. They said that the man who owned the cattle they were caring for was Abe Slaughter, a well-known Western cowman, and that they were waiting at Salt Licks to hear further instructions from him, as they themselves did not know what was the ultimate destination of the herd.

They were well posted as to affairs in the vicinity, and evidently knew all about the rising on the part of the Chippewa Indians. They said that the rough riders were lucky in getting their herd through, as they did, to Salt Licks, and expressed admiration for the quality of the steers when they heard what a splendid all-day-and-night march they had made.

They were still more astonished when they heard that Ted intended starting back without any sleep to go in search of a comrade who, he was afraid, was in danger on the prairie.

Bud Morgan told them this, and they would not have believed it had it come from the lips of anyone beside Bud. Bud was known far and wide on the ranches, and his word was as good as another man's bond wherever he went.

"So that's Ted Strong?" asked one of the cowboys, glancing over to Ted, who sat eating a little distance off in the light of the fire.

"That's the man," said Bud, "an' you won't meet his equal anywhere. He's the whitest man I ever worked for. I knew he was white, but I never knew what a white man he really was till I had a little talk with him out on the prairie ter-day. He sort of called me down, too, but he went up about ten pegs in my estimation fer doin' it."

The cowboy he was speaking to rose on his long, slim legs and walked over to where Ted was seated.

"Pard," he said, "I have hearn a lot about ye an' wanter interdooce myself ter ye. My name is Mooly, an' I am the boss of Slaughter's herd down ther river a bit. We are held up here awaitin' orders, an' as

I see your boss is about tuckered out, an' as I knows from Bud tellin' me that ye has to take another run ter-night, I want ter offer ye the pick of my remount for a loan. Ye can leave one of yer own hosses fer security, though I know, of course, that yer all right."

"I'm much obliged, I'm sure," said Ted, rising. "I do need another horse. Every animal in my outfit, including all the remounts we brought, is tired out. We couldn't bring much of a remount, as we were short-handed and couldn't spare a man for a horse wrangler, so the remounts had to go along with the chuck wagon. I'm a thousand times obliged for your kind offer and will accept it."

"Don't say another word," said Mooly. "Just come over here and I'll let ye take yer pick out of our remount. We've got some pretty recent ponies there, too."

Ted had finished his hasty meal by this time, and felt very much refreshed from his short rest. He dusted the crumbs from his coat, and after a few parting words to Bud in regard to counting the herd in the morning and keeping it at Salt Licks until he returned, he went off to Slaughter's camp.

He could easily see that there was a big herd of cattle there, but so far as he could judge in the dim light, he could tell that they were not in so fine condition as the longhorns from the Black Mountain Ranch.

Mooly led him to a long pen which had been made by stretching out ropes from stakes driven in the ground. The horses of the remount were tethered here, and Ted, lantern in hand, looked them over and finally picked out a rather small horse of a solid bay color.

"I see as how you kin judge a horse when ye see him," said Mooly; "that's about the best all-round horse in ther bunch, an' he has plenty of bottom in him."

"He'll suit me, all right," said Ted. "And I'm a thousand times obliged for the loan of him. Any time you come anywhere near the Black Mountain Ranch, just drop in and try the taste of our chuck."

"I'll do it and be proud, too," said Mooly, "an' ef there's nothin' more I kin do fer ye I'll turn in."

Ted swung himself to the bare back of his borrowed horse and gave the halter at its head a jerk.

"Good-night," he said, and then he cantered away to get his horse saddled and bridled.

Mooly watched him until the darkness had swallowed him up.

"There goes my best loss, an' I may never see him again," he muttered. "That young feller may run plumb into those Chippewas an' get gathered in. But the loss of the pony wouldn't bother me so much as ther death of the boy, although I've never seen him before. He's shore the pluckiest I ever seen."

CHAPTER VIII.

CAUGHT IN THE CIRCLE.

A pitiless sun was beating down upon a barren stretch of rough country, seeming to burn everything to a dull ochre hue under its hot rays.

The country was not rolling and grassy, as it was farther to the north on the prairie, but rugged and mountainous. It was near the Black Hills, twenty miles or so out from the frontier settlement of Mac-Gregor and about as uninviting a stretch of territory as one could find anywhere in Dakota. Here and there a great sandstone butte rose like a sentinel out of the sun-baked plain, and farther to the south there was a little clump of timber that marked the position of a water course.

Under one of the sandstone buttes, scarcely sheltered from the burning rays of the noonday sun, crouched a boy. His horse was tethered in the shadow of the rock beside him, but one glance at the horse would have shown that there was little need of tying. Its drooping head and lolling tongue spoke more eloquently of weariness and the awful agony of thirst than any words could.

The boy himself was in little better condition. His black hair looked as if it had turned gray, so thickly sprinkled was it from the flying, biting alkali dust of the plain. His face was drawn and haggard, pale and despairing, caked with white dust and sweat and lined

with fatigue and pain. His lips were dry and parched, so dry that they seemed to crack almost when they moved, and his great black eyes shone out from his pale face with feverish intensity. The eyes were gazing steadily toward the clump of timber, where the boy knew that water could be found. The blazing heat of the sun shimmered in his eyes, and his head swam. His eyeballs smarted, and hot, involuntary tears made furrows down his cheeks.

Water!—that was what the boy wanted, and he knew it was there, scarcely a mile away; yet it was as much out of his reach as though it were in another world.

“Those red devils,” muttered the boy, “they are behind those sandstone buttes beyond and are waiting for me. They know that I must sooner or later get to the water or starve. I would have gone back. I could do it, but I want to save the life of the horse. I may have to go back, anyway.”

The boy put his sombrero on the point of his rifle and stuck it out cautiously beyond the shelter of the rock beneath which he was crouching.

From a pile of boulders between him and the clump of timber came a puff of smoke. A report, sounding faint and far off, came to his ears an instant later, and something spattered against the rock above his head.

It fell almost on his face, and he picked it up and looked at it, although the flattened leaden bullet was so hot that it scorched his fingers.

“That’s what I’ll get,” muttered the boy, “at least if I make another break for the water hole. I’ll have to crawl back and leave the horse. He could never make a ten-mile journey now without water, and the last water I passed is ten miles back. It will be all I can do to make it myself. I suppose I will have to shoot the horse to put it out of its agony. I dare say Ted Strong would be tickled to death to see me here now. I guess he would enjoy it. But he’ll never have that satisfaction, anyway. When these redskins make an end of me they’ll leave me so nobody will recognize me. That’s one comfort. He’ll never have the satisfaction of knowing how I ended up.”

Kit Summers was half crazed with pain and thirst.

He had been pressing on to reach MacGregor when he had sighted Indians ahead of him. If he had retreated he might have saved himself, but all the stubbornness of his nature, all the strength of his violent and passionate temper had been aroused at the time, and he would not have drawn back for all the Indians in the West.

He had hoped to dash through their lines, and the wily savages, seeing that they could draw him into a trap, had allowed him to penetrate into the middle of this sun-baked plain and then opened fire up from behind the shelter of the boulders.

Kit Summers had been determined on saving his horse, but now it looked as if he must leave him. The boy never thought that he himself might be caught, as well as his horse. So far as he knew, he could make his way back on foot.

He was too intent on his object of reaching MacGregor at all hazards to think of any of the possibilities of his position. Had he known what had been going on behind him he might have felt even more desperate.

While he had been lying in the shelter of the butte, looking with longing eyes to the trees that marked the water course, a band of feathered savages had been slipping around behind him.

Now they were gathered in a little compact group in a sheltered hollow half a mile back. Their horses were hobbled beside them and they were chatting in monosyllables among themselves. They had plenty of time to wait. They had caught the white boy in a trap and they were in no particular hurry about springing it. In fact, they seemed to enjoy playing a little with their victim, giving him an apparent chance to escape—in much the same way that a cat enjoys playing with a mouse.

Their eyes gleamed with a cruel, bloodthirsty light, and their thin, lined faces, smeared with war paint, were merciless. They had gone on the warpath partly through the pressure of hunger and partly through the urgings of some half-crazy medicine man. Now that they had dug up the hatchet that had been buried so long between them and the palefaces, they were pre-

pared to kill relentlessly everything living that they met.

And it looked as if Kit Summers was to be the first victim.

He was half dead with thirst and fatigue, and his position in the shelter of the sandstone butte, and just out of reach of the water, which he and his horse were dying for, was terrible; yet his bulldog courage was not shaken a particle. Had it not been for his kindness to his horse, his hope to save its life by getting it to water, he might have retreated and saved himself all this suffering. And now the poor horse must die, anyway, for there was no possible chance for it.

Kit had many faults, but he had many fine qualities. He had always a kind heart for men and animals weaker than himself. His bad temper and bitterness had always been shown against those who had tried to conquer him. He looked at the horse for a long time, hesitating and biting his lips.

Kit had ridden the horse for years, and it had carried him safely through many a place of danger. It had known the slightest pressure of his knee and obeyed it. At that moment it seemed to Kit that there was nothing half so dear to him as the animal which he now saw dying before his eyes and dying in the most horrible agony—all the more terrible because it was dumb and mute.

"It's the best friend I have in the world," he muttered. "I'm unlucky and any good friend of mine will be unlucky. It's only those who fight me that have any luck. I wouldn't give this horse for twenty Ted Strong's. Ted Strong!"—Kit ground his teeth together—"Ted Strong is seated at the ranch house taking it easy, like as not. And this poor horse is dying! Ted Strong pretended to be a friend of mine, and then started in to cut me out with Kate Lamont. He wanted every girl chasing around after him. One girl wasn't enough for him. Well, he'll have them all now."

Kit drew out his pistol and poised it in his hand. Then he pressed it against the temple of the horse and tried to pull the trigger, but could not.

He saw the horse looking at him with suffering,

trusting eyes, and he flung the weapon to the ground while hot, blinding tears streamed down into his cheeks.

"It's Ted Strong led me into this fix," he muttered. "But I must kill that horse. I can't bear to see it suffer that way any longer. It's hard, old chap, but I'll have to do it. Your master doesn't amount to much now, although you think so. You're the only living thing in the world that cares for me and is faithful to me, and the kindest thing I can do to you is to kill you."

Kit stooped to the ground and picked up his pistol. Then he pressed it against the temple of the horse once more. He looked the other way, and the pistol cracked while a slim, white wreath of smoke floated up on the still air. The horse toppled to the ground, kicked once and lay still.

Kit, with his face buried in his hands, kneeled beside the body for a moment or so, apparently forgetful of his position, for rifle and revolver lay unheeded at his side.

Then he straightened up again with a new look on his face. He had finished mourning about his horse and had summoned up all his courage and resolution to save his own life. He gathered his weapons up out of the hot dust and replaced the empty cartridge in the revolver with a fresh one from his belt. Then he cast another glance at the heap of bowlders that lay between him and the water.

"MacGregor is only a few miles beyond," he muttered. "It seems funny they have got me this way. I should have known better than to press on when I saw that Indians were out, but MacGregor was such a short distance away I thought that I would be sure to reach it. If I hadn't been in such a bad temper I suppose I never would have acted so rashly. But it's up to me to get back. I've got ten miles or so to go to get to water, and I feel as though I would be dead with thirst before I could reach it."

Kit started forward cautiously to move away from the rock, but he knew well enough to keep it between him and the bowlders behind which the Indians were concealed, so he had no fear of their bullets. At first

he walked erect, as the rock, from its size, protected his rear well enough.

Then, as he went farther and farther from the sandstone butte, he crouched and finally went on all fours, ever and anon casting a glance behind him to see if the Indians were starting in pursuit of him.

The heap of bowlders from which the firing came seemed utterly destitute of life, so Kit moved forward faster than ever.

"Those fellows must be asleep," he muttered, "but I dare say they haven't caught a glimpse of me yet. I must be pretty near out of their range now. I had less trouble in getting away than I thought. I'll be able to get up and walk now, as I'm pretty well out of range. They can't hit me at this distance."

Kit was tired crawling on his hands and knees in the hot, burning dust, from which the sun was reflected into his face with blinding heat. He slowly straightened up to an erect posture. Then he fell flat again, for a rifle cracked somewhere in front of him. The bullet sung over his head and the next instant a savage howl of triumph came from the ambushed Indians as they spurred out of their hole on their little ponies. Kit saw them swing out in a long line and ride past him, firing as they went. He heard other whoops behind him, and the sound of other firing, and he knew that he had been caught in a trap, indeed.

The Indians had lured him out of his shelter behind the rock. Now he was lying in the midst of the arid plain without even the body of his horse to shelter him, and they were swinging about him in a great circle, riding in Indian file and firing and cheering in savage war whoops as they rode.

"I've read of things like this," muttered Kit, as they cantered past him. "I never thought to see it happen to me. I'm done for. I'm caught in the net."

CHAPTER IX.

TED STRONG CHIPS.

In the meantime Ted had been having one of the hardest and most wearisome rides of his life.

He had been in the saddle a great part of the night

before, and what sleep he had secured had been snatched while stretched out on the hard floor of the jolting chuck wagon. All the previous day he had been riding hard, tending the herd and watching it, and the night march, which had ended at midnight at Salt Licks, had not allowed him a moment's rest. Almost any other boy would have been too exhausted to sit erect in the saddle, and at ordinary times Ted might have been half dead from lack of sleep from the same exertion.

But this time Ted felt in his heart that there was a human life at stake. His will power and determination were so great that his frame seemed to be made of iron, and he pressed forward through the night as though he were as fresh and well rested as the frisky little bay horse which he bestrode.

He knew that Salt Licks were a great deal nearer MacGregor than the Black Mountain Ranch was, and that Kit, starting as he did, and riding out across the prairie, would be trying to reach MacGregor by a roundabout way on account of several spurs of hills around which he must ride.

Ted knew the country better than Kit did, and in reality if Kit had followed the cattle trail for a part of the way in his journey toward MacGregor, he would have made much better speed reaching it. Ted knew well enough the road that Kit would have chosen, and, besides that, Jack Slate had told him the direction in which he had ridden off, so with this fresh horse under him Ted felt that he would have no trouble in intercepting Kit.

If he met him he felt sure that he could persuade him to go back with him to join the other boys. He knew that although Kit had a violent temper, its extreme violence never lasted any great while, and that after the first outburst the dark-eyed boy was generally amenable to reason.

As for the Indians, he came across their trails more than once after the sun rose the following morning. They were plain enough now, and it was clear to Ted that there must be at least fifty braves on the warpath.

The tracks of their unshod ponies looked fresh and

recent in the rays of the morning sun, and Ted's face lengthened as he looked at them.

"They're going just about the way I was afraid they would go," he thought. "They'll cut off around the spurs of the Black Hills between Black Mountain and Crook City. I hope that they don't reach those spurs at about the same time that Kit does."

At about seven Ted stopped and ate several sandwiches, which he carried with him, and drank freely of the water from his canteen. His limbs felt sore and stiff, but otherwise the strain he had undergone recently seemed to have left no effect on him.

He allowed his bay horse to drink freely at a stream nearby and then he filled his two-quart cavalry canteen with the water.

"There's not much water going down there among the buttes," he thought. "I may need this."

Then he unslung the nose bag from the saddle horn. It was half full of oats, and he strapped it around the horse's head and let him feed while he stretched out on the grass to rest his limbs a little. He knew that an oat-fed horse will have more speed and bottom than a grass-fed horse, and he wanted this bay he was riding to do its very best work for him.

Now commenced the most wearisome part of the march. The sun was climbing higher and higher in the sky, and he was leaving the pleasant grassy country behind him and climbing up into an arid, rugged plateau without springs or water holes, where the heat and drought forbid life of any kind.

Here and there great sandstone boulders stood out above the plain, and far off in the distance were the wooded slopes of the Black Hills.

Ted allowed his horse to slow down to a walk now. He knew that he had no water for it, and he wanted to keep it as fresh as possible.

He, himself, leaned forward in his saddle, sometimes nodding in sleep while the bay kept up its steady walk to the southwest.

The sun beat down with such force on this plain, which reflected all its rays back with redoubled intensity, that Ted felt it scorching him even under his heavy Western tan.

The heat made his head sing. He nodded forward in his saddle, farther and farther forward, until his head rested on the blanket roll strapped to the pommel. He was asleep. But he did not sleep long. He knew that he was too near the Indians to take any chances, and by an effort of the will he brought himself up, wide awake again. He was just walking his horse up a rocky slope, when the far-off sound of a rifle shot rang in his ears. His foot was out of the stirrup, and he was off the saddle in a second. One glance about showed him where he was. He was near the top of an eminence overlooking the sandy plain. Behind him was a hollow, sheltered somewhat by rocks and cottonwood bushes, and it was the work of a second more to lead his horse into this and hobble it securely.

Then Ted crawled out rifle in hand and climbed to the top of the nearest boulder, lying flat on his face on the hot stone, although it was almost as bad as lying on a stove.

The shimmering yellow plain was stretched out before him, for he was on the highest piece of ground in the immediate vicinity.

Half a mile away from him was a great sandstone butte standing alone and rising for some distance above the plain. Half a mile or so farther on was a clump of timber marking the nearest water course.

Beneath Ted, a quarter of a mile away in a little hollow, were a group of Indians well mounted and well armed. He could see plainly the bright feathers in their war bonnets and the glint of the sun on the barrels of the rifles they carried.

Their attention was evidently riveted on the lonely sandstone butte in the middle of the plain, and Ted looked in that direction, too.

"I wonder if they have got Kit cornered there?" he muttered.

His question was soon to be answered, for an instant later he saw the boy's figure step out from the shelter of the butte. Then he saw the Indians before him fire and ride into the open, and a moment later saw the formation of the flying circle which had caught Kit Summers in its noose.

He saw Kit fall on his face at the firing, but was able to judge pretty well that he had not been hit.

"I just got here about in time," he muttered. "Those Indians will ride about Kit in a big ring for about half an hour before they do any real danger. In fact, I don't believe they'll shoot him. They'll scare him till he wastes all his ammunition. Then they'll take him alive, so they can torture him. They have a good healthy fear for a man with a rifle, and don't like much getting within range. We have a good chance, for the whole fifty redskins are not there by any means."

Ted was right in saying that there were not fifty redskins in the party which had cornered Kit. The trap they had sprung for the boy had required some time, and had been rather slow work for a great many of the bucks. Consequently the greater part of them had ridden off, leaving a dozen behind to take care of Kit. Ted counted them as they rode around in their swinging circle, and then began to snap the lock of his repeater.

He saw puffs of smoke from the saddles of the Indians, and heard the faint reports as they fired. Then he heard the whiplike crack of Kit's rifle, and saw one of the savages topple from his horse.

His eyes flashed with pleasure.

"Good boy, Kit," he muttered. "You may go off at half cock once in a while, but you're a scrapper through and through. They'll have to kill you first and ask you to surrender afterwards if they want to gain any victory over you. Bully for you! Hit him again."

It has been given to very few men to see such a wonderful living panorama of a bitter fight to the death as Ted watched that day. He watched it, a-quiver with excitement, almost breaking out into cheers now and then, for it was such a spectacle as no man might look upon and remain unstirred.

He saw a white boy fighting for his life, a boy lying in the midst of a great plain of burning dust, half dead with thirst, and half blinded with the glare of light, fighting a dozen mounted fiends and fighting with the cool grit and courage of a thoroughbred.

A man with less control over himself, with a less

discerning brain and weaker nervous system would have pitched into the fight a score of times before Ted did. But Ted was a born general, and he had seen frontier skirmishing against odds before. He knew that there was a right time for him to open fire, and he lay there on the rock, watching with all his eyes and fighting with all his strength to keep from showing himself until that right time had arrived.

He saw the savages, howling like fiends, swoop and wheel in their never-ending circle, which always drew closer and closer around the boy, who lay a dark spot in the yellow plain in their center.

He saw Kit aiming and firing coolly and steadily, stopping when the redskins swung out of range and opening again when they came back.

And he was shooting well. His bullets never hit very far away from the flying Indians, and more than one redskin pony felt the hot agony of a leaden messenger from Kit's rifle.

Kit himself had given up all hope. He knew that he was doomed, but the stubborn tenacity of his disposition which had made him press on so recklessly to the water hole kept him fighting as bravely as ever.

He choked and spluttered in the hot, dust-laden air, but his set jaw never weakened and his eye never wavered in spite of all the bright sun shimmer, as it ran along the hot, gleaming barrel of his rifle.

Twice he emptied the chambers in his Winchester. One Indian was out of the fighting, crawling away across the plain with a riderless horse walking after him. Another was crouched in the dust beside his dead steed, enduring the agony of a broken shoulder blade in Indian silence. A third was limping away for the shelter of a heap of bowlders, using his rifle as a crutch, one leg broken at the ankle with a Winchester bullet.

But the others were drawing their deadly ring closer and closer. Their weapons spoke incessantly, and Kit could now see plainly their painted, masklike faces as they flashed past him.

They swung closer and closer, and in spite of all his courage Kit felt his head swim and his hand grow un-

steady. He fired, but missed twice, his bullets going wide of their mark.

The Indians came sweeping past him once more.

Their feathers, fluttering in the wind, the wide, free sweep in which their horses swung past him out on the plain, reminded him of some strange birds of prey, evil and strong and rapacious, circling about in the air before swooping down upon their victim.

And he was the victim—imprisoned in this deadly circle. It seemed now that he was floating in the air, and that he was buoyed up on an ocean of dazzling, shimmering, yellow dust through which the painted redskins wheeled and yelled. They flashed past him once more and he felt the bullets biting into the dust all around him.

He pulled trigger, but the magazine of his rifle was empty. There was no report. His eyes seemed glazed over now, so that he could scarcely see, and the yells and hoofbeats seemed to come from afar off. But still his trembling hand moved down toward his cartridge belt to reload his weapon.

It groped and fumbled blindly among the empty loops. There were no cartridges there.

But still Kit had not given up. He pulled himself together, stuck out his jaw and grasped his revolver.

"Buck up," he said to himself. "I'll kill one of them before they do for me. Here they come."

And again the savages wheeled around past him. Kit's voice rang out in a wild yell, fully as fierce and savage as the cries of the redskins. He raised himself on one elbow and steadied his revolver as well as he could in the other wavering hand. But his face was as stern and set as that of death itself. There was no thought of giving up in his fierce heart as his revolver spoke again.

Crack! crack!—shot after shot until the chambers were empty. But the bullets flew wild. Shooting with a revolver is a good deal harder than shooting with a rifle.

Kit cursed under his breath and flung the empty weapon on the ground. Then, with a great, staggering effort, he raised himself to his feet, his face still turned toward his merciless foes.

He raised his voice in a last cry. The voice was weak and wavering, but it was as full of stubbornness and grit as ever.

"Come on, you red fiends!" he yelled. "Come on! I'll fight you. I'll fight you with my bare hands. You're afraid to come near me, you skulking cowards! Come on! I'm not afraid of you. You can't make me afraid of you!"

Kit staggered forward with his clinched fists thrust out before him.

"Let me get my grip on you," he gasped. "Let me get one of you by the throat. You'll never shake me loose until I have choked and choked—until I have squeezed and crushed the life out of you."

Kit lurched and fell forward on his hands and knees.

The savages had stopped riding and were gathered together in a little group, looking, with their horrible, masklike faces, at their victim.

Kit tried to regain his feet again, but could not. He was too weak. But he still crawled forward.

"You're afraid!" he snarled. "Wait for me if you dare! I'll fight you one by one. I'm not afraid of your war paint and feathers and yelling, you red cowards. You have me in a trap, have you? Well, you can't frighten me!"

The leader of the reds raised his hand and they started toward Kit.

The boy saw them coming. He saw their horrible, grinning faces, smeared with hideous paint and streaked with perspiration.

"Come on," he cried. "Come on and kill me. I'm not afraid of you."

He tried once more to stagger to his feet, but was unsuccessful. His limbs swayed and wavered beneath him, and he lurched forward on his face.

At the same instant the report of a rifle rang in his ears. He looked up and saw one Indian pony tumble to the ground, while its rider caught on his feet and dashed off across the plain with a wild yell of fear.

Crack! crack! The rifle spoke again. Kit could not tell where the firing came from, but he could see the redskins wheel and turn in a panic. Two more reports and one of the savages dropped his rifle, a bullet

through his arm. Then, all at once, panic seized upon the remaining reds. The unseen rifle still kept crackling, and with every crack a leaden bullet went whizzing into their midst. They looked in all directions, trying vainly to control the frenzied prancing of their ponies. They could not see where the shots were coming from. They had just won a victory, they thought, and now some deadly and unseen foe was sending bullet after bullet at them. They could hear the balls whistling past their ears and sending up spurts of dust in the ground about them. One pony was hit in the foreleg, and with a wild whinny it started away at a mad gallop, its rider trying vainly to pull it up.

Again and again the rifle spoke and two more Indian ponies stampeded. Then fear entered the hearts of the others—blind, unreasoning fear of some terrible hidden enemy. With wild yells of terror they spurred their ponies away, some of them not stopping at the cries of their horseless comrades who wished to be picked up behind.

Kit had pitched forward on his face unconscious. The last thing he had remembered was the band of Indians approaching him to make an end of him.

He lay in the midst of the sun-baked plain like one dead, not knowing what had happened.

Ted Strong had chipped into the fight, and he had chipped in at the right moment to save Kit's life. A moment later would have been too late. A moment earlier and his interference might have been in vain, owing to the numbers of the savages. He had taken them by surprise when they thought that Kit's black scalp was already within their grasp, and they fled like sheep before his rifle.

CHAPTER X.

'KIT IS BEATEN.'

The first thing that Kit knew with returning consciousness was that some strong yet tender hand was holding up his head, and that a cool and grateful shade had been spread over his bloodshot eyes. He opened them and blinked, but could not see. Then he tried to

speaking. At first it seemed as if his parched lips, pressed close together in the stubbornness of the conflict, would not come apart. Then his mouth opened, but no sound came therefrom. He tried to articulate, but his lips were so stiff and dry that it seemed that they were cracking through and through with every faint movement. At last he was able to make a sound. One word, hoarse and indistinct, came from his lips.

It was "Water!"

The next moment something cool and round was pressed between those lips. It was the canteen of Ted Strong, and Kit could hear faintly the gurgle of its cold, delicious contents. It was the sweetest sound that he had ever heard—so sweet that it almost maddened him. He tried to swallow twice, but the muscles of his throat were too weak to respond to his will.

The canteen was tilted up a little higher, and he felt the cool fluid dropping into his burning mouth. He drank.

Kit had never imagined that he would ever taste such bliss as he drank down with those first gulps of water. But it did not last long, for Ted soon took the canteen away from the boy's lips and laid it to one side, while he moistened and smoothed his forehead with water poured into the palm of his hand.

A great sigh of content came from Kit's lips, and he sank back in Ted's arm like a baby nestling on its mother's breast. For perhaps five minutes he lay there, utterly exhausted, while Ted watched over him, now and then moistening his lips from the canteen. He had picked Kit up from his position in the plain and carried him back to the hollow, sheltered by rocks and cottonwoods, where his borrowed pony was tethered.

Presently Kit opened his eyes and began to breathe more naturally.

A moment later he sat up and stared at Ted's face.

"What!" he gasped. "Ted Strong? Am I dreaming? Did you come here to make fun of me? They didn't beat me, anyway."

"Rest a minute, Kit," said Ted, gravely. "You

don't know what you are saying. You are a little out of your head yet."

"I must be," said Kit, looking about him. "Where are the Indians?"

Kit smiled.

"You can search me," he said. "They went off in the direction of MacGregor, and they went a great deal farther than they came, I'll warrant that. I never saw anything so thoroughly scared before."

Kit watched about him in wonderment for a moment and then his eyes fell on Ted's rifle, which lay beside them on the ground. Scattered around it was a little heap of empty Winchester shells.

Kit knew what they meant.

Then his eyes roved about the plain and out toward the sandstone butte, beneath which he had taken shelter a short time before. Then his eyes came back and took in the position of the sheltered hollow in which Ted had been lying. To his keen vision it showed at once as a vantage coign from which a man could command the plain below and fire upon the redskins at will without much risk of being speedily discovered.

"You fought those fellows and chased them off," he said. "You were up here and took them by surprise. I cleaned out some of them."

"I rather think that I did take them by surprise," said Ted. "You were doing pretty well with them yourself, though. They were not as good generals as Indians generally are, or they would never have left their retreat unguarded the way they did. It was a cinch for a fellow to climb up here and take pot shots at them while they hooted around there on their ponies. I guess they thought that you were about the only white man in this vicinity, or they wouldn't have been so careless. When I opened up they must have thought that the Great Spirit had come after them with a Winchester repeater, and meant to gather them all in in a hurry. I didn't kill anyone of them. It's sometimes better to scare a man than to kill him. If he's killed he'll fall dead, and the others may never think of running away. But if he's scared he'll run away, and it's

about a ten-to-one shot that somebody else will see him doing it, get scared himself and follow his example. That's what happened."

Kit sat up straighter and looked Ted full in the eyes.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" he asked. "I thought you had started off on a trail for the Blackfoot agency."

"So I had. I got the herd up as far as Salt Licks yesterday. Bud Morgan is up there with it now. I just came back here for a little ride around."

"You knew that there were Indians out?"

Ted nodded.

"And you knew that I was out here somewhere?"

"I thought that it looked like that."

"And you were anxious about me?"

"I thought that you might want to see me for a minute or two in case you got into a little scrimmage with the reds."

"It's a good many miles from here to Salt Licks. You must have ridden day and night to get here. I can see from your face that you are about tuckered out."

"Why, it was a pretty long ride," said Ted; "I must admit that I have felt livelier than I do at the present moment."

"You came here at the risk of your life. You came here after me because you thought that I was in danger. Did you know what I was doing here? why it was that I wanted to get to MacGregor?"

"I knew, all right, but that doesn't make any difference between friends."

Kit's head fell on his breast. He did not look up for a minute or two, and when he did look up there were tears on his cheeks.

"Ted Strong," he said, "those dozen Indians out there on the plain tried to beat me, to scare me, to make me give up and call quits. You saw that the odds against me were pretty big. Well, let me tell you that they could not beat me. They could kill me, but they couldn't beat me. And you've done what

they couldn't do. You have beaten me, Ted. I came out here to do you a bad turn. My heart was full of hate against you. You followed me and nearly killed yourself with fatigue to save me. You saved me at the risk of your own life. I've never acknowledged that I was beaten in my life before. Somehow, I have something in me that wouldn't let me. But now I want to tell you that you've beaten me at last. I never can look you in the face again, Ted."

Kit's voice choked and he was silent, but Ted laid a strong and kindly hand on his shoulder.

"Kit, old man," he said, "I don't want to beat you at anything. It wasn't for that that I rode after you. It was because that I knew that in your heart you were my true friend, and that I wanted to help you to get the better of your own self and your own bad temper. Let me tell you something. You came out here because you were angry with me. You were angry with me because you thought I was trying to cut you out with Kate Lamont, because you saw me talking to her a great deal in private. I don't want to cut you out with her, and couldn't if I tried. I haven't a chance. I was talking to her about a brother of hers, of whom she wanted news. He's a fellow who went to the bad and I did a little, I think, toward helping him to reform. I never told any other of the boys about this, but I tell you now."

"Why didn't she tell me about him?"

"Because she was afraid of your passionate disposition. She thought that you might go off at half cock and do something rash. And let me tell you that she read you about right as a good girl will generally read a man she knows. That's just what you did yesterday. That's just what brought you here. You let your temper and your impulse carry you away. You went off at half cock and never used your judgment."

"How long were you up there watching me fight the reds?" asked Kit.

"Since the beginning of the fight."

"I see what you mean," said Ted. "If I had been in your place I would have chipped in at the beginning.

The redskins would not have been taken by surprise as they were. They outnumbered us, and probably would have killed us both. That would have been going off at half cock. But you didn't do that. You waited till the Indians were so taken up with the thoughts of scalping me that your firing upon them was a complete surprise. And you won out. I see what you mean, and I promise you here and now, Ted, that I'll try and learn a lesson myself."

There was a silence for a few moments, and then Kit spoke with a faltering voice.

"Ted," he said, "I won't promise to be your friend now. I'll try and show you what I can do without any promise. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you!" Ted's arm was around Kit's shoulder. "There's nothing to forgive. But, see, it's nearly sunset. It's time we were getting supper. We'll camp here to-night and to-morrow get back to Salt Licks for the herd. You don't want to go to MacGregor now, do you?"

"Not in a hundred years."

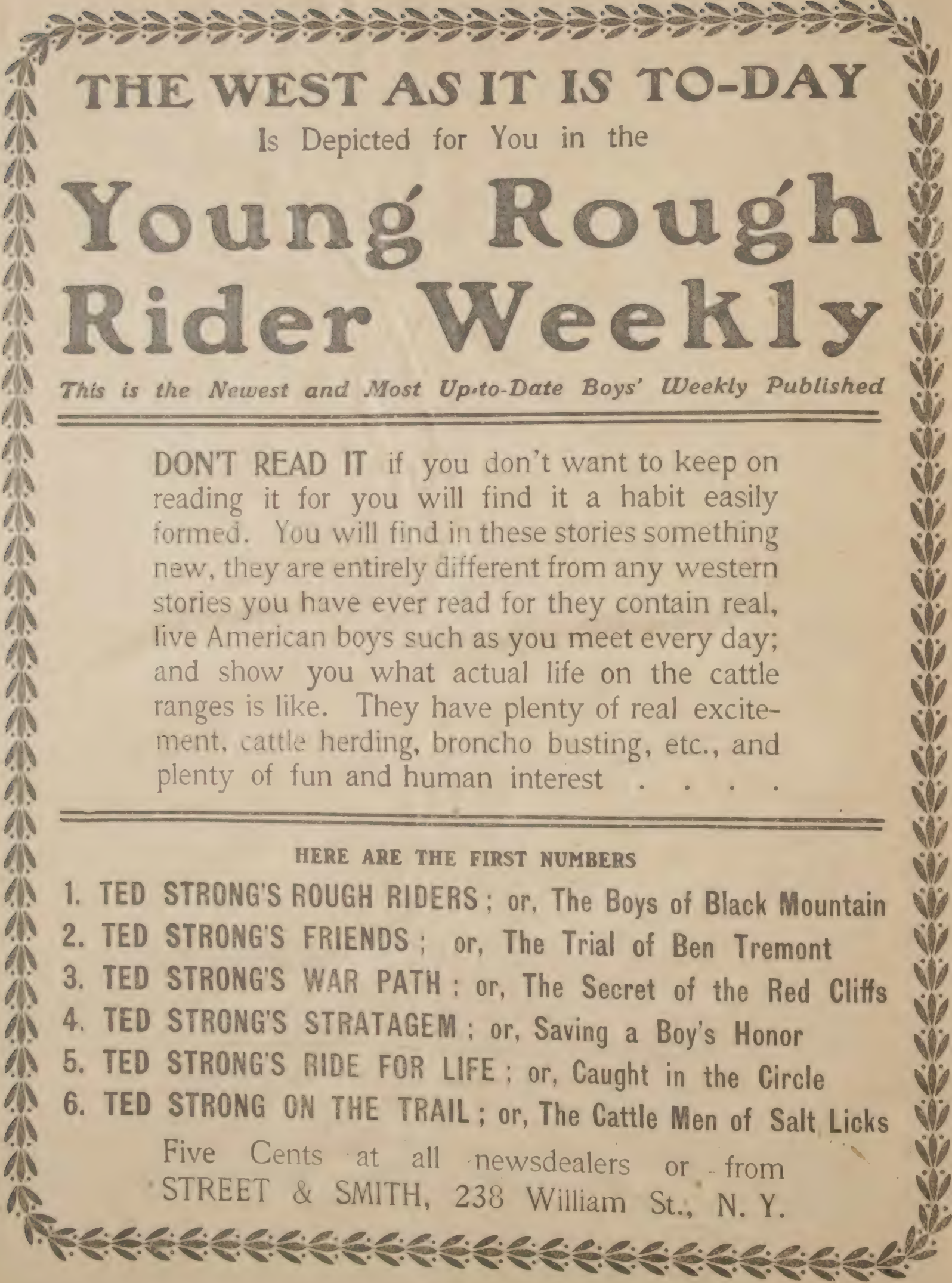
And so, when Ted and Kit joined the herd at Salt Licks, a day later, the other boys met with a great surprise, for Kit had not the slightest objections to the steers being sold to the United States Government.

THE END.

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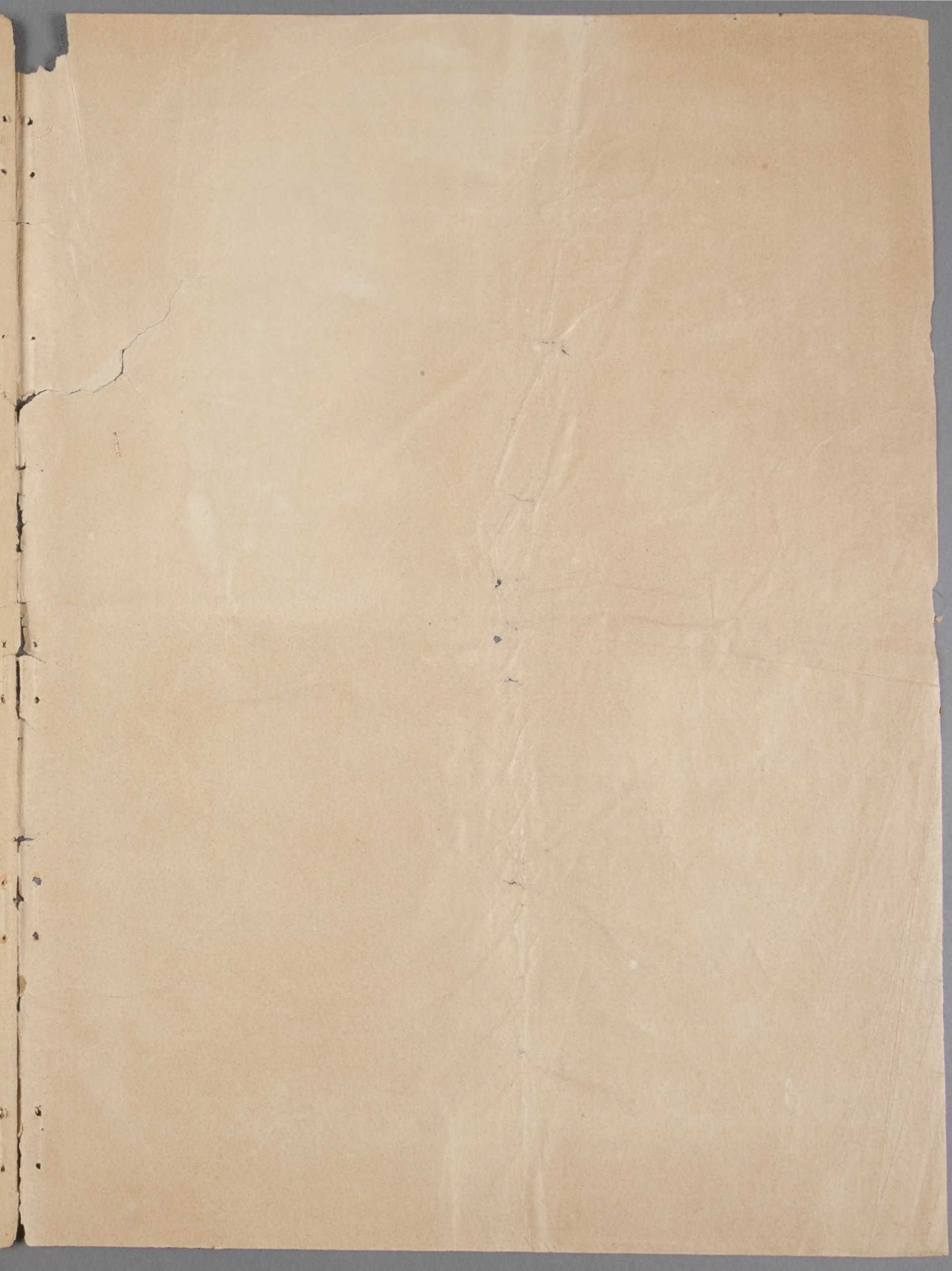
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